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ON PAGE Da. 17

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White House Denies Espionage Blunder

President Carter has rushed to clear his deputy national security adviser, David L. Aaron, of the charge that he inadvertently compromised a top U.S. spy in the Soviet Union.

The White House has called the accusation "completely unfounded" and an "unsubstantiated rumor." The FBI and the CIA have dutifully confirmed that there's no substance to the allegation.

Certainly Aaron is a sterling fellow, high on the White House totem pole, who would never intentionally unmask an American agent. Indeed, he may be as innocent as the White House insists he is. But my own investigation indicates otherwise.

In the subterranean world of half-light where espionage is practiced, the truth is always difficult to discern. Yet my associate Dale Van Atta has questioned four intelligence sources who are familiar with the case. They have been scrupulously accurate in the past.

They claim that Aaron let slip some ultra-secret information at a party, that an intercepted diplomatic dispatch proved he had talked out of turn and that the White House is more anxious to cover up the embarrassment than to uncover the truth.

Aaron's slip allegedly exposed the identity of Anatoly N. Filatov, a Soviet intelligence officer, who worked undercover as an American agent known to the CIA by the code name Trigon. The unfortunate spy disappeared into the Soviet prison system after a secret military trial in 1978.

The Soviet press reported he had been executed. Some CIA officials believe he committed suicide. His Moscow lawyer claims he is still alive, serving out a 15-year sentence.

The information that Aaron spilled at the party, sources say, came from "blue line" documents so secret that only a trusted few insiders are allowed to see them. There are several levels of secrecy above top-secret. Some papers are stamped with code words, which themselves are classified. Even more guarded than these are documents with blue lines running down the pages.

Only the most sensitive information appears in blue-line documents. Aaron allegedly mentioned to an East European diplomat some facts that had come from a blue-line document dealing with Warsaw Pact nuclear weapons.

Apparently, a third-world diplomat happened to overhear Aaron's careless conversation with the East European. The eavesdropper reported the conversation in a cable to his own foreign office.

The cable was intercepted and decoded by America's ultra-secret National Security Agency. The message was such an embarrassment to the White House that, under an executive order for the protection of private individuals, it was supposed to be destroyed. Yet I understand a copy was kept and might be ferreted out if the FBI looked hard enough.

Shortly thereafter, the CIA canceled all blue-line clearances. This was done, sources say, because Aaron had compromised the documents and had "rolled up one of our agents."

The nuclear weapons information that Aaron revealed, so the story goes, pointed a finger at Trigon. But other sources, who confirm Aaron's blue-line slip, believe Trigon was really compro-

mised because he "lived too high" on the money the CIA paid him.

Footnote: Shortly after I first wrote about the Trigon case, two members of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) and Malcolm Wallop (R-Wyo.), asked the staff to investigate. This could be awkward, since Aaron was a staff colleague before he moved to the White House.

Secret Warning — Long before the Iraqi-Iranian outbreak, the Joint Chiefs laid before the president a top-secret warning that a crisis in the Persian Gulf could erupt "at any time" and that it "could curtail access to the oil required by the United States and its allies."

The military chiefs warned that the "dramatic worsening of the military balance in the Middle East-Persian Gulf region" exposed the "oil-producing states in that area to much greater potential security threats."

They foresaw the danger of Soviet intervention — not "a bolt from the blue nuclear attack on the United States" but limited military action, Afghanistan-style — in the early 1980s.

"The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the first major Soviet-American incident of the 1980s, may well be a harbinger of the greater risks of military confrontation which can be foreseen in the decade to come," wrote the Joint Chiefs.

They warned that Soviet forces "could intervene in regional political conflicts and become a threat to U.S. and Allied access to oil supplies." And the United States doesn't have the military power to stop them, short of nuclear retaliation.